

A RESPONSE TO DR. TEPKER'S

THE INSPIRATION AND INERRANCY OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

Dear fellow members of the Body of Christ, I regard it as a genuine privilege to have this opportunity to make a small contribution to the vital discussions of this convocation. I appreciate very much the evangelical spirit of Dr. Tepker's address. I trust that this spirit will contribute positively to the atmosphere of our meetings together.

Dr. Tepker began his paper by citing five questions on both inspiration and inerrancy which he indicated are some of the basic issues among us on this particular topic. However, I think it is fair to say and extremely important to say that the inspiration of the Scriptures is itself not an issue in our church. All parties to the current dispute are agreed that the Scripture is the inspired Word of God and the only norm of doctrine and practice. There is even fundamental agreement on the particulars of this teaching, which particulars Dr. Tepker described at length. Moreover, I believe that all affirm the truthfulness and reliability of Scripture as something which the Scripture claims for itself and as something which is a corollary of its inspired character. As we consider the issues that do exist among us, we need to be constantly aware of this remarkable unanimity in the public teaching of the church.

THE ISSUE IN BRIEF

The real debate surrounds the concept of inerrancy. The point at issue is, what does the Scripture itself enable us to say about its truthfulness and reliability? In what sense, if any, is "inerrancy" a suitable and helpful term for expressing that truthfulness? Indeed, can we even define inerrancy in a way that can be consistently and meaningfully applied to all parts of Scripture? These questions identify the technical, theological point of controversy.

However, more is at stake than just a technical point of theology. If a definition of inerrancy which stresses the flawless character or factual precision of all parts of the Bible is raised to the level of a doctrine and considered necessary for maintaining the authority of Scripture and the truth of the Gospel, then serious problems arise. First of all, such a claim for inerrancy goes beyond what Scripture claims for itself. Therefore, to insist upon it as doctrine is to bind consciences to human opinion. More importantly, to rest the authority of Scripture on such a version of inerrancy, detracts from Scripture's real authority. All authority is from God; Scripture is authoritative simply because it is God's Word. Through that Word of Law and Gospel, the Spirit works to create and sustain faith in Christ. It is in this faith that we recognize Scripture as the Word of God and its truth as the sole authority for our doctrine and life.

This faith does not require that we buttress or guard the authority and truthfulness of the Scripture with rationalizations concerning the errorless character of its text. In faith, we trust that God is able to use various forms of human utterance, even those which appear to have contradictions or deficiencies to effectively convey to us His divine truth.

Rather than impose our own definition of "inerrancy" on the sacred text, we really ought to let the Bible itself define the nature of its inerrancy. We all believe that "God will not deceive us" and none of us should presume to dictate the precise way in which God could or could not have given us His truth. Rather, we ought to accept the Scriptures as they are, and define the terms "truthful" and "reliable" according to the Scripture's own testimony.

In other words, Scripture alone can give evidence of the manner in which it pleased the Holy Spirit to use human authors, in all their individuality and limitations and literary forms, in all their rich variety, to speak the Word of

God to humankind. In short, the principle of sola Scripture^o also applies in our formulation of the doctrine of Holy Scripture itself.

This then, is a brief statement of the issue as I see it. It is essentially the same capsule summary of the matter agreed to by my colleagues and ~~I~~^{me} in the so-called "moderate" contingent of the Advisory Committee on Doctrine and Conciliation. Indeed, the substance of my entire presentation is largely dependent on the work we did together in this committee during the past year. It is my intention now to expand on this basic analysis in somewhat greater detail.

THE QUESTION OF INERRANCY

As I indicated earlier, all elements of our church affirm that Scripture, the inspired Word of God, is truthful and reliable. Now, when we employ the term "inerrant" to describe this quality of Scripture's truthfulness and reliability, all of us make certain qualifications as to what is meant by that term. However, these qualifications appear to differ among the scholars and teachers of our church.

For many of us, if the term inerrancy is to be used at all as an attribute of Scripture, then it should be used in accordance with the witness of Scripture itself. The truth of the Scriptures is something to be understood in terms of their own criteria and of the qualities they themselves exhibit. Therefore, it is significant to note that Scripture does not claim the attribute "inerrancy" for itself as we have often defined that term in our tradition. There is no term in Scripture that corresponds to an understanding of inerrancy as indicating "flawlessness" or "factual precision" in all parts of Scripture - even those details peripheral to the intention of a given text or to the purpose of Scripture as a whole.

Of course, the fact that Scripture does not use a given term or concept does not mean that the church cannot appropriate that term or concept in a doctrinal

formulation intended to summarize what is considered to be a logical deduction from clear Scriptural evidence. Following this rationale, the inference has been drawn in our tradition that, because the Holy Spirit inspired the Scripture, it follows that the perfect God must produce an inerrant text.

However, for an inference drawn from Scripture to be accorded the status of a doctrine binding on the consciences of the church's pastors, teachers, and members, it must be demonstrably clear that the Scriptural evidence warrants this. It is the judgment of many of us, who have studied this matter for many years, that the whole witness of Scripture to itself, both in its declaratory statements and in the characteristics of its text, does not support the use of inerrancy as indicating flawlessness or factual precision in all parts of Scripture.

What we do discover in our study of Scripture is clear evidence that the Holy Spirit accommodated the language of the Scriptures to the peculiar characteristics and limitations of their authors and audiences throughout a lengthy and complex history of textual development and transmission. It is out of this process of the Spirit's work in and through the contingencies of history that the qualities of the Scriptures have emerged. And, as Dr. Arthur Carl Piepkorn once observed,

These qualities do not - speaking generally - include great precision in formulation, stenographic fidelity in reporting exact words, prosaic literalism in interpretation, bibliographically accurate citations of author and title, comprehensive documentation, carefully synchronized chronologies, a modern historiographic sense, harmonistically consistent adjustment of sources to one another and meticulously exact descriptions of attendant historical, physical, and other scientific details. These were not generally the qualities of the men or of the cultures which the Holy Spirit employed, and where these qualities are absent in the Sacred Scriptures, this, too, is a mark of the Holy Spirit's condescension and accommodation not to error but to humanity. Admittedly, the picture of the Sacred Scriptures that emerges when all these factors are taken into account is likely to be less tidy than a purely theoretical construct, but it is also likely to be more realistic, more correct, and more genuinely truthful.¹

¹"What Does 'Inerrancy' Mean?" Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXVI, 8

In connection with this point, I am glad that Dr. Tepker was so careful in his paper to acknowledge the human side of Scripture as inseparable from its divine side and to indicate further that a full recognition of this human dimension in no way detracts from the divine character of the Bible.

In view of the characteristics of the Scriptural text cited in the quote from Dr. Piepkorn, a notion of inerrancy as flawlessness or factual precision is almost impossible to apply in any consistent and helpful way. It would require a literalistic approach to the Scriptures that simply ignores the evidence of their historical, human dimension.

However, Lutherans are not and never have been literalists. We have always held to a doctrine of accommodation to explain the Holy Spirit's use of human authors. As Dr. Tepker pointed out, "...the Holy Spirit did not dictate the Scriptures, but he inspired the holy writers in a way which allowed them to use their own style of writing, their own research, and to pursue their own purpose for writing." Because of this accommodation, we have always made certain qualifications concerning what we mean by the term inerrancy. We all recognize that Scripture contains verbal inexactitude in quotations, quotations according to sense, differences in parallel accounts, figurative and hyperbolic language, mythic elements as a mode of expression, accommodation to ancient cosmology, and the like. The recognition of these things in the Bible does not contradict inerrancy as long as: 1) it is the author's intention to use figurative or hyperbolic language; 2) the reader is not being deceived; 3) the statements in a real sense correspond to facts or truths; 4) the literary device or genre employed is indicated directly or indirectly² (and "indirectly" means that the text does not tell you what kind of language it is using; you as interpreter

²See Robert Preus, "Notes on the Inerrancy of Scripture," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXVIII (June 1967), pp. 363-375.

must make that judgment yourself on the basis of form). Dr. Tepker mentioned some of these same qualifications in his paper. It needs to be emphasized that all these qualifications of the meaning of inerrancy are based on interpretive judgments concerning the way in which the text is speaking and the extent to which the Holy Spirit accommodated himself to the conditions of history.

Since we all agree that such interpretive judgments must be made and since we approach them in willing submission to the inspired Word, we are agreed in principle on how one studies the Bible and we are agreed in our reverence for the Word. There are differences among us as to what conclusions are exegetically defensible as we struggle to understand what the text of Scripture tells us about the way in which the Holy Spirit worked in and through the historical, human situation. However, these differences do not touch on articles of faith nor do they indicate differences in loyalty to Scripture.

In view of all the qualifications the text forces on the term inerrancy and in the absence of any direct statement of Scripture, it is questionable whether "inerrancy", defined as flawlessness or factual precision in all parts of Scripture, can be consistently applied in a meaningful way. It is even more doubtful, therefore, that a single definition of inerrancy should be made a doctrinal requirement.

THE TRUTHFULNESS AND RELIABILITY OF SCRIPTURE

I have given this too-brief analysis of the inerrancy question in the hope of making some small contribution toward clarifying one outlook that will be under discussion during this convocation. In addition, I hope the remarks to this point have given some hint of the complexity and subtlety of this issue and, therefore,

of the need for time and great care in discussing it. At the same time, I have wanted to underscore the fact that the consensus we currently share and the non-doctrinal nature of the differences that do exist permits us to take all the time and care we need.

Beyond this, I must say on behalf of all who can identify with the views I express that the thrust of our position on Scripture is not one of discrediting inerrancy. We need to disabuse ourselves of the idea that is sometimes expressed, in one form or another, that there are people in our church making a career out of undermining the truth of Scripture. It just isn't so! If inerrancy is meant simply to emphasize the Holy Spirit's authorship of Scripture and the truthfulness and reliability of Scripture, then I'm certain we can all accept it. The CTCR has stated this usage of the term quite well:

In calling the Scriptures inerrant the Church is expressing the conviction of faith that these words, as words taught by the Holy Spirit, are a truthful, wholly reliable, and uniquely powerful witness to the words and works of God and that these inspired words in their concrete human form are the very voice of the God of her salvation.³

The inspired Scriptures, the Word of God, are truthful and reliable. They will in no way lead us astray. They express what God intends them to express and they accomplish what God intends them to accomplish.⁴ The emphasis here is on the truthfulness and reliability of God's personal address to us.⁵ It is God's

³"A Study Document on Revelation, Inspiration and Inerrancy," Part Two, III.

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⁵The Confessions themselves treat the truthfulness of Scripture in this way by stressing the utter dependability of God's personal address in judgment, command and promise. In the Large Catechism Luther points out that it is on the strength of Christ's Word and God's command that the Lord's Supper and Baptism are effective means of grace. In his command and promise, God does not err or deceive. (Pt. IV, 56,57) Similarly, in discussing our participation in the Lord's Supper further, Luther says to those who do not feel the need for the grace of the sacrament that they should believe the judgment of the Scriptures upon their sin. God's judgment on them is true. (V,76-78) Again, it is with reference to the testimony of Christ concerning the real presence of his body and blood in the sacrament that the Formula of Concord affirms that "...God's Word is not false nor does it lie." (Ep., VII.13) God's address to us in judgment, command and promise is true and reliable.

nature to be truthful and reliable as Dr. Tepker correctly pointed out. The stress is not on the errorless character of a book. As the Theses of the Lutheran Church of Australia point out, the written word is a servant, "... which is interested not in technical precision for its own sake but in a popular, intelligible presentation which best serves the saving purpose of God." (cited by Dr. Tepker, p.14)

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I have tried, within the limits of time and the limits of my own ability, to state the crux of the issue concerning the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. I have also tried to express a specific point of view, which I understood my assignment called for. From this I am led to the conclusion that our differences are not doctrinal and ought not be divisive of fellowship. They are principally exegetical differences. And, I suspect, these differences are dictated in part by other differences in mindset and past experience, which are extremely difficult to analyze and deal with.

I know that, no matter how persuasive the arguments may be for temporizing in our views of inerrancy, there will remain a fear and suspicion that to do so will ultimately undermine the truth and authority of Scripture and our very faith itself. It will permit people to reach exegetical conclusions about certain portions of Scripture that are different from those we have been accustomed to. This is threatening to many for it raises in their minds the spectre of further and more radical conclusions that will eventually erode the foundations of our confessional faith.

I believe that such fears are unnecessary. By the power of the Spirit working through the Word, this Word of God authenticates itself in our midst each and every day. The truthfulness of Scripture and the gift of our faith will be maintained among us by the same gracious God who has given us His saving Word.

His promise in which we trust is our ultimate security as we struggle with our human limitations in a fallen world to understand the nature and message of his Word ever better and ever anew. Paul's word to the Corinthians is a word for us as well,

I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him with all speech and all knowledge - even as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you - so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Cor. 1:4-9)

In the spirit of this promise we can hope and pray that this convocation may be the catalyst for patient, prolonged, fraternal discussions throughout the church, free from recrimination - discussions in which we can learn from one another and be reconciled to one another as we strengthen one another for Christ's mission.

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